

‘We are the Ones We’ve Been Waiting For’: Information, Communication and Today’s Struggles for A Livable World-System

Jackie Smith, Editor [Journal of World-Systems Research](http://www.journalofworldsystemsresearch.org)

This article was written for *PEWS News: Newsletter of the ASA Section on Political Economy of the World-System* December 10, 2018 <http://asapews.org/pn19-2.pdf>

A new world-system is struggling to emerge. Its success in doing so is critical to our survival. What is becoming even more clear in recent months is the centrality of communication and information to that struggle to reshape the world in ways that better support life and society. New threats to journalists and independent news producers, corporate concentration of media and information technology, and government and corporate use of big data present daunting challenges.

In light of this context, it is worth recalling the demand for a *New Information and Communication Order* raised by the Nonaligned Movement in the 1970s as part of the New International Economic Order. The latter grew from the insights of dependency theorists in arguing that historical relations of colonial exploitation obstructed freedom and democracy in the newly independent countries of the world. Although the core powers relegated the NIEO and its related communications demands to the sidelines of the international agenda, it has continued to shape ongoing dialogues and political processes within the UN system. Its persistence on the international agenda is evident in the [2011 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression](#), which recognized the right to internet access as a fundamental human right.

The New Information and Communication Order generated the [McBride report, *Many Voices, One World*](#), which stressed the dangers of commercialization and concentration of media industry and highlighted technology’s role in shaping access and equity in communications. These three factors remain critical to the future of press freedom, and indeed the growth of corporate power and concentration, along with the increased and intensified commodification of information and technology require much more critical and engaged attention from scholars and others in today’s society.

The [Windhoek Declaration for the Development of a Free, Independent and Pluralistic Press](#) is a statement of press freedom principles produced by African newspaper journalists at a UNESCO seminar in 1991. UNESCO endorsed the Windhoek Declaration, which established basic media principles of freedom, pluralism, and independence, and in 2006 UNESCO put forward a set of [Media Development Indicators \(MDIs\)](#) as a framework for assessing national progress. The MDIs emphasize the critical role of community media and education/ professional development in defending freedom of the press. To help promote and popularize these values, the United Nations General Assembly recognized May 3rd as [“World Press Freedom Day,”](#) following Windhoek recommendations.

I share these recollections of our history as we all watch with growing trepidation the developments in our world today. I believe we all have a role to play in helping shift the course of human society, and yet too few of us recognize how important each one of us is to this struggle for a different world-system. The PEWS Section’s [Journal of World-Systems Research](http://www.journalofworldsystemsresearch.org) is one way we help support the emergence of a more just and equitable world. Our journal was among the very first Open Access scholarly journals, and after nearly 25 years of publishing, I believe we can claim to be the longest-running free scholarly journal. But we can do much more to both promote the JWSR’s potential and to support more broadly

the Open Access movement and the new information and communication order of which it is a key part. Here are a few reminders and suggestions for how each one of us can do our part in bringing about the world we need.

- (Re)commit your energies to actively supporting Open Access and [defending the Knowledge Commons](#);
- Promote and popularize “[World Press Freedom Day](#)” on May 3rd each year;
- Promote greater popular understanding of the media’s role in democracy, equity and freedom;
- Address the problem of **corporate concentration and the commodification of information** in your research, teaching, and writing;
- Develop a course on media, technology and democracy in world-systems perspective, perhaps drawing from some of the references in this article;
- Support and promote the [Journal of World-Systems Research](#) by encouraging submissions and helping promote our content.

Our current issue of JWSR features an insightful symposium on “[Populisms in the World-System](#),” which we hope you will help circulate among your students and personal networks. The symposium is meant to help communicate world-systems ideas to a broader audience, and our contributors provide some short and accessible papers that can help bring a world-historical perspective to contemporary debates. Recent research articles by [Peter Wilkin](#) and [Timothy Gill](#) provide more detailed analyses that demonstrate how today’s predicament has been shaped by decades of neoliberal policies that enabled and supported right-wing mobilizations in [Hungary](#) and [Latin America](#). For those seeking guidance and cause for hope, check out our Summer/Fall 2018 book review symposium, “[Counter-Hegemony in the Current Conjuncture](#),” featuring reviews of nine books that outline alternative visions for what a more just and equitable world-system might look like, and how to get there.